

RESPECTFUL, RESPONSIBLE AND RECIPROCAL RURALITIES RESEARCH: APPROACHING AND POSITIONING EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH DIFFERENTLY WITHIN AUSTRALIAN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

One approach that is helpful in framing and facilitating effective and ethical rural education research projects is centred on ensuring that researcher-participant relations are respectful, responsible and reciprocal, predicated on the shared principles of CHE (connectivity, humanness and empathy). This approach derives from a strengths-based paradigm that eschews deficit discourses about supposedly marginalised groups in favour of more enabling and productive narratives.

This paper illustrates the appropriateness and utility of this approach to researching ruralities through a comparative analysis of two separate research projects involving rural residents in different parts of Queensland, Australia. One study investigated the approaches taken by selected rural families to enhancing the physical movement opportunities and experiences of their young children. The other inquiry explored the formal and informal learning aspirations and outcomes of members of mobile show or fairground communities whose itineraries pass through a succession of rural towns.

The paper highlights ways in which the researchers, despite approaching and positioning educational research differently in their respective projects, worked to maximise the outcomes accruing to the participants. This maximising is a prerequisite of educational research that provides mutual benefits to participating communities and that builds on their ruralities respectfully, responsibly and reciprocally.

active play, Australia, children, families, mobility, rural education, ruralities, show people

Introduction

The field of contemporary rural education research is rich and abundant. Current foci of this field include the following elements: identity and agency (Balfour, 2012); sustainability (Balfour, De Lange, & Khau, 2012); leadership and poverty (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009); the complex intersection between rurality and Indigeneity (Constable, Dixon, & Dixon, 2011); ageing rural populations (Zanjani & Rowles, 2012/in press); the health and well-being of adolescent females (Eime, Payne, Casey, & Harvey, 2010); senior secondary school enrolment options and patterns (Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010); and the recruitment and retention of rural teachers (White, 2010). This diversity of coverage is accompanied by an equivalent variety of conceptual and methodological approaches, reflecting the heterogeneous experiences and understandings of multiple ruralities rather than a single, undifferentiated rurality.

Against the backdrop of this heterogeneity and multiplicity, it is incumbent on all educational researchers to interact appropriately with members of rural communities, who are often positioned as marginal and othered in relation to residents of urban centres. From this perspective, researchers have a responsibility, not only to conduct and report research about significant contemporary issues, but also to do so in ways that promote the educational, physical and sociocultural health and wellbeing of rural residents.

Given this responsibility, an increasingly significant subfield within the field of rural education research relates to the ethical and political dimensions of conducting educational research with members of rural communities. For instance, this subfield includes the dilemmas faced by a Western-trained academic returning to his rural home in Bangladesh to conduct research, and having to negotiate both Bangladeshi and Western cultural norms and research practices (Hamid, 2010). Similarly, the interplay of ideology and connections in researching rural education in China entailed surmounting diverse centres of power in that research (Nordtveit, 2011). Furthermore, the involvement of rural teacher education research in Australia in debates about social justice highlights its ethical and political aspects (Cuervo, 2012). Moreover, ethics and politics underpin the decision whether to provide financial compensation to participants in rural education research in Kenya (Hammett & Sporton, 2012/in press). Relatedly, the complexities of collaborative rural health research in Canada evoked ethical and political questions about who the research participants and stakeholders were and how their interests could be identified and addressed (Moffitt, Mordoch, Wells, Martin Misener, McDonagh, & Edge, 2009). The complexity and diversity of this subfield are reflected in the equivalent intricacy and variety of broader conceptions of research ethics and politics and of the multiple and sometimes competing roles and expectations of contemporary rural education researchers.

The authors of this paper seek to contribute to this subfield of the ethics and politics of conducting rural education research by elaborating a framework that they contend can enhance the ethically grounded and the politically responsive character of that research. This is especially the case when participating communities are constructed by themselves and/or by others as marginalised and othered in specific ways (see for example Bishop, 2011). For instance, this might entail asking certain kinds of research questions and avoiding others that intentionally or otherwise replicate that community's marginality and otherness (Chapman & Schwartz, 2012).

The framework that is articulated in the paper is based on the principles of CHE (connectivity, humanness and empathy) (Reushle, 2005; Brown & Reushle, 2010). These principles were applied contemporaneously to the first-named author's doctoral dissertation (Brown, 2012) and retrospectively to the second-named author's doctoral dissertation (Danaher, 2001). Despite the conceptual, methodological and empirical differences between them, both dissertations are discussed here in order to demonstrate the wider relevance and utility of the framework and its potential applicability to other current rural education research studies.

Both projects were qualitative case studies that sought to understand education from the perspectives and based on the voices of the respective participants, in order to address broader research questions about educational provision for and access by Australian rural communities. Each study mobilised data gathering and analysis techniques that aligned with and implemented the CHE principles. These techniques included ice-breaking strategies, organising interviews on familiar territory and seeking to establish a balance of power between the researcher and the participants.

The paper is divided into the following four sections:

- A focused literature review and conceptual framework that locates the CHE principles in contemporary rural education scholarship while also making a case for their usefulness in extending that scholarship;
- The respective research design of the two doctoral dissertations;
- The analysis of selected data from each study that illustrate the CHE principles in action;
- Suggested implications of both studies for the continuing reinvigoration of rural education research.

The authors argue that it is both feasible and desirable to distil from the CHE principles strategies for current and future rural education research that are respectful, responsible and reciprocal, and that contribute powerfully to approaching and positioning educational research differently and more productively within rural communities in Australia and internationally.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

An increasing number of rural education studies is paying explicit attention to the ethical and political elements of the associated research projects (see for example Clark, Hunt, Jules, & Good, 2010; McInerney, Smyth, & Down, 2011). For instance, White and Reid (2008) adopted an explicitly ethical and implicitly political stance by arguing for the need to "ensure the provision of high-quality education for children in rural families and the need for well-trained teachers who are personally and professionally equipped to address the educational needs of their communities" (p. 1). Walker and Clark (2010) explored the political strategies used by rural parents in England to negotiate primary school choice for their children. Kalaoja and Pietarinen (2009) championed the contribution of small rural primary schools in Finland to the Finnish education system, which nevertheless threatens their existence through ongoing centralisation, with the authors thereby contributing to a political issue in educational provision. These highly diverse studies exhibited specific value positions on the part of the respective researchers who, despite that diversity, shared a conviction that rurality is an appropriate and positive lifestyle and location option and a commitment to supporting rural community residents who select that option. Accordingly, these researchers were far from being value neutral in their research positioning, adhering instead to particular ontological, epistemological and axiological standpoints (see also Martin, 2008; Mertens, 2010).

Similarly, a number of rural education researchers identified specific research methods that they have deployed in order to maximise the respect accorded to the participants in their respective studies and to enhance the benefits accruing from such participation. For instance, as a way of ensuring confidentiality while maintaining the credibility and richness of data, Twyford, Crump and Anderson (2009) created vivid vignettes that described common experiences of participants without identifying individuals in relation to vocational education and training in Australian rural communities. Starr and White (2008) employed grounded theory to elucidate constructions of leadership among small rural school principals in Victoria, Australia. Ansell, Robson, Hajdu and van Blerk (2012) applied participatory research methods to explore the impact of AIDS among young people in Lesotho and Malawi, including in rural areas in both countries. Pykett (2009) examined the informal constructions of citizenship in urban schools in England partly through the lens of rurality, even though that lens was largely missing from those constructions, thereby highlighting the need for researchers to attend to what is absent from, as well as what is present in, empirical data.

All of this suggests that researchers studying rural education work in complex and

contested physical, sociocultural and conceptual spaces. The ethical and political dimensions of that work require them to pay ongoing attention to ensuring that their research is as respectful, responsible and reciprocal as possible, in order to maximise the potential benefits to research participants and other members of their rural communities. This in turn generates significant challenges and opportunities for rural education researchers, who need to balance this requirement with other and often competing demands and expectations of their endeavours.

As was posited above, one possible means of facilitating this kind of respectful, responsible and reciprocal rural education research is to build on the principles of CHE, conceptualised as connectivity, humanness and empathy (Reushle, 2005; Brown & Reushle, 2010). Central to those principles is the process of inviting research participants to share their perspectives and disclose information, which entails establishing a high degree of rapport and heightened interpersonal relationships between researchers and participants (Goodwin, Pope, Mort, & Smith, 2003; Guillemin & Heggen, 2009). In a real sense, this process constitutes a depoliticisation of research, because it intentionally blurs the boundaries between the roles of researcher and participant. Similarly, this blurring of boundaries often requires a seamless shift between self as researcher and other roles that might include sharer of information, confidant and friend (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputong, 2006; Dockett, Perry, Earney, Hampshire, Mason, & Schmied, 2009; Higgs, Moore, & Aitken, 2006). This depoliticisation in turn helps to create a climate in which researchers move away from being perceived as experts, thereby disrupting the power relationship “between researchers and people they encounter in the field” (Parameswaran, 2001, p. 1).

As it is deployed in this paper, the term “CHE” was inspired by the research of Reushle (2005), who referred to “CHE” as one of 10 key design principles recommended to help to build capacity with in-service teacher education students in an e-learning environment. The complex interplay among connectivity, humanness and empathy are also principles that researchers can apply to assist in setting participants at ease with the interview process, and in doing so shorten “the distance between the researcher and the researched” (Johnson, 2009, p. 30). Furthermore, when employed effectively, this interplay can lead to key turning points in the ongoing project of building rapport between and among researchers and participants (Pitts & Miller-Day, 2007).

More specifically, the first CHE principle, *Connectivity*, is recommended to occur as part of the initial element of the interview process, where the primary concern is gaining entry and participant consent. Pitts and Miller-Day (2007) referred to this stage as the “other” orientation phase in which “the focus is not on the self, but on the other” (p. 188). This period of establishing initial rapport can include such strategies as using first names, exhibiting body language that reflects openness and acceptance, and engaging in eye contact and smiling within the culturally constituted behavioural norms of the participant group/s. These strategies help to value participants’ contexts and demonstrate a welcoming of their opinions (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputong, 2007).

Humanness, the second CHE principle, reinforces a position of reciprocity, whereby all research participants are recognised as both the givers and the receivers of information (Johnson, 2009). This position requires a certain degree of self-disclosure and the sharing of experiences that helps to implement what Pitts and Miller-Day (2007) likened to a “reciprocal, symbiotic relationship” (p. 180). This process of relationship forming echoes a feminist paradigm, whereby researchers seek the self-disclosure of sometimes sensitive information about intimate or private aspects of people’s lives. In such situations, it is common for researchers to share equivalent information as a way of demonstrating their humanness (Johnson, 2009). Another means of displaying that humanness is to establish an atmosphere of

informality – for instance, by researchers wearing smart casual clothes in order to set a more informal tone (Mack, Woodson, Macqueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). This technique can assist in building a trusting relationship that overcomes initial emotions of vulnerability, cautiousness and apprehension on the part of participants.

The third CHE principle is *Empathy*, a quality of emotional intelligence that aligns closely with a strengths-based axiological position when research is being conducted. Adopting this approach moves the interview focus away from one of interrogation to one where researchers are much more in tune with developing enduring relationships with participants, which in turn acknowledges and values their contributions and positions (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputpong, 2007). Exhibiting empathy requires researchers to enact three specific steps. Firstly, they must communicate a deeper level of interest and an appreciation of participants' contexts and experiences by employing active, open-ended questioning and responsive listening techniques. Secondly, they need to demonstrate a genuine interest and a sincere desire to understand participants' viewpoints and worldviews. Thirdly, they should be intuitive and pay close attention to participants' body language, the tones of their voices and their emotional states, in order to comprehend more fully the multiple meanings of their words (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001).

In combination, the three CHE principles are posited as providing a framework for designing, conducting and implementing rural education research in ways that can create more productive and empowering relationships between researchers and other participants in the research. Moreover, they represent a welcome opportunity to reinvigorate and reimagine rural education research through maximising separate and shared benefits and highlighting multiple roles and mutual responsibilities among researchers and participants alike. These propositions are illustrated below by means of selected examples taken from the authors' respective doctoral studies.

Research Design

As was noted earlier, the two doctoral studies (Brown, 2012; Danaher, 2001) that are used to demonstrate the CHE principles in conducting rural education research differ considerably from each other. Using an intrinsic and instrumental case study (Stake, 2010), Brown (2012) conducted research with three rural families, investigating their contextual understandings and idiosyncratic experiences, environments, motivations and values in supporting the active play opportunities of their young children. She adopted a social ecological framework that enabled the research to be directed at identifying the situated nuances that operated on and were embedded in the lives of the parents and their young children and that impacted on their efforts to support these experiences.

Danaher (2001) explored the formal and informal educational aspirations and outcomes of several families belonging to the mobile show or fairground community that traversed the eastern states of Australia and whose itineraries brought them into regular contact with a succession of regional and rural towns (see also Danaher, 2010). He identified ways in which the show people engaged in three simultaneous and parallel processes. Firstly, they experienced educational and sociocultural marginalisation on account of their occupational mobility. Secondly, they resisted that marginalisation in particular ways. Thirdly, working in partnerships with educators and policy-makers, they transformed that marginalisation and resistance into more productive and sustainable educational provision more closely related to their distinctive way of life. Danaher's (2001) doctoral study was part of a larger collaborative

research project involving at different times a team ranging from three to seven researchers. His study also contributed to national and international networks of researchers examining the education of mobile learners (see for example Dyer, 2006).

Despite the clear differences between the projects, they shared a qualitative orientation and an interpretivist paradigm, with both researchers working hard to understand the lifeworlds that framed the respective participants' worldviews and to observe at first hand the material and intangible influences on their experiences of and attitudes towards rural education. Data collection techniques in the two studies included observations, informal conversations and semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews conducted in the interviewees' homes. Data analysis drew on content and thematic analysis linked to each study's research questions and conceptual framework, which in turn informed each project's contributions to theoretical, methodological and empirical knowledge.

Data Analysis

This section of the paper presents selected data that illustrate the operation of the CHE principles in conducting these two rural education research projects. Each principle is discussed in turn here; the implications for contemporary rural education research are distilled in the next section.

Connectivity

As was noted above, connectivity is the first CHE principle and is centred on establishing initial rapport between researchers and participants, gaining informed consent to participate and developing some sense of awareness of and hopefully commitment to the research project. This phase is clearly crucial: without such commitment the project will founder, to the researcher's detriment but also with the loss of a potential opportunity to benefit rural residents. Both researchers were very conscious of the importance of generating connectivity in ways that were ethically appropriate as well as likely to sustain their respective studies.

In 'connecting' with parents in families with young children (birth to four) in the domestic space of the family home, Brown (2012) was concerned to overcome any feelings of vulnerability, cautiousness and apprehension that her intrusion into this social environment might have generated for the participating parents. These feelings might have occurred if the parents had perceived that they were being judged or compared to best parenting practices. In order to ensure that participants felt at ease in sharing details of their experiences (Fraser, 2004, p. 185), it was important that interviews took place at times conducive to family routines and schedules and within an environment that was non-threatening for participants in order to help lessen any perceived power differential (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This usually meant that interviews occurred within the home environment where the researcher was able to observe at first hand the flow of the busyness of the domestic space.

Brown (2012) conducted three interviews with each family, with each focusing on a different line of questioning. As well as the first visit with each family being used to gather rich background and contextual details, this was an opportunity for establishing connectivity. Techniques included: i) making explicit the goals and background behind the research project – this included reinforcing that the research was not about judging the parents but rather it was about understanding their context; ii) creating opportunities for integrating informality and light chat and banter integrated into the interview process; iii) being very careful to use body language that would reflect openness and acceptance, such as engaging in eye contact and

smiling; and iv) validating the parents' stories and ideas by demonstrating openness to their opinions.

Danaher's (2001) initial contacts with the Australian show people were made as part of a larger research team, who were able to mobilise their individual and group networks to identify potential research participants. Two parallel but distinct sets of relationships needed to be fostered: one was with the show people; the other was with the Brisbane School of Distance Education that at the time provided formal schooling to the show children (Danaher, 1998). Each set of relationships had a formal hierarchy, with the support needing to be enlisted respectively of the Executive Officer of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia and the Principal of the School. Each set of relationships also included holders of informal influence whose endorsement of the project was equally vital.

At the informal level, once official approval to conduct the research to which Danaher (2001) contributed had been obtained, individual show people and teachers were courteous, yet it was clear that they were appraising the researchers to see whether they trusted them and were disposed to establish a working relationship with them. For the show people in particular, who had experienced considerable marginalisation on account of their mobility, acceptance of the researchers was by no means automatic, but instead making decisions about whether to accept them on the basis of initial interactions and perceptions.

Humanness

As was also noted above, humanness is the process that builds the initial connectivity in the researcher–participant relationship. This process is crucial to breaking down any lingering feelings of mistrust, shyness or vulnerability on either side, and to consolidating the relationship as one of mutual benefits and shared longer-term interests.

Brown (2012) employed a number of techniques to support this spirit of humanness in her research. One such technique involved the reciprocal nature of information sharing where, at timely points during her conversations with the parents, the researcher shared ideas, suggestions and resources on a topic that arose. This information was shared in the spirit of the researcher not being an expert or always a receiver of information, and as a way of giving back to the participants via the interview process. There were also many instances where, during the interview, efforts were made to reaffirm parenting practices or build on the ideas that were being discussed. Another CHE strategy to enhance the humanness dimension of the developing relationship was to establish an atmosphere of informality. This included considerations of the ways that the researcher chose to dress and present herself for the interviews.

While Brown (2012) was able to share with the participants in her study the shared experiences of parenting, none of the members of the research team to which Danaher (2001) contributed had experience of sustained mobility, so it was important to establish humanness in a different way. This was addressed initially by the researchers communicating a genuine curiosity about specific aspects of the show people's apparent difference, such as their children associating their birthdays with a place (the show people tend to follow the same itinerary each year, so that they would generally be in the same places along the circuit year after year) rather than with a date. Similarly, considerable conversation focused on the question, "Where is home to you?", responses to which evoked the emotional, social and spiritual as well as the physical dimensions of the complex and very human phenomenon of home. Inevitably that conversation included the researchers sharing their respective experiences of home with the participating show people.

Empathy

Finally, empathy requires goodwill and interest on the part of all participants in a research project. Recalling the three-stage process outlined above, to enact empathy researchers need to communicate an appreciation of participants' contexts and experiences; they must demonstrate their genuine desire to understand participants' viewpoints and worldviews; and they should build on their intuition to understand the multiple meanings of participants' words (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001).

In her doctoral study, Brown (2012) understood the important quality of empathy being an essential ingredient in forming a reciprocal, symbiotic relationship with the research participants, rather than adhering to a disposition of detachment and objectivity. This was primarily achieved by viewing parents through a strengths-based axiological lens and involved "softening people's defences" (Johnson, 2009, p. 30). This helped to move the focus of the interview away from being an atmosphere of interrogation and impersonal data collection to one that included much more of a focus on interpersonal relationships that acknowledged the relevance and value of participants' diverse experiences (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputpong, 2007). By being empathetic during interactions, the researcher encouraged the parents to be much more open to disclosing aspects of their behaviours and thoughts that may not have been shared otherwise.

Demonstration of the attainment of empathy in Danaher's (2001) doctoral study occurred when the show people asked him to accompany them to a briefing with officials in the Queensland Department of Education, as part of the show people's lobbying for a separate school for their children. Despite the researcher's and his colleagues' concern at the time that accepting the invitation might somehow invalidate the research team's role (Danaher & Danaher, 2008), he attended the briefing and spoke with the officials about educational provision for occupationally mobile groups in other countries. This incident illustrated both the ambiguity and the strength of empathy in the research project.

Implications

According to Jensen and Lauritsen (2005), "Arguably, the problem of the social scientist is not that his connections are too many and too strong, but that they are too few and fragile" (p. 72). Similarly, Monahan and Fisher (2010) contended that "Instead of aspiring to distance and detachment, some of the greatest strengths of ethnographic research lie in cultivating close ties with others and collaboratively shaping discourses and practices in the field" (p. 357).

Certainly both authors, on the basis of experiences in designing and conducting their respective doctoral studies, are convinced of both the methodological utility and the ethical and political appropriateness of the CHE principles of connectivity, humanness and empathy (Reushle, 2005). In each research project these principles contributed directly to strengthening the relationships binding researchers and participants and to enhancing rapport and trust. Consequently the researchers and the participants were able to move beyond an initial set of interactions based on tentativeness and uncertainty to a more sustainable and longer-term association in which mutual benefits and interests could be identified and addressed.

Specifically with regard to data collection and analysis, adopting an approach to data collection and the interview process whereby history, experience, values and views are acknowledged and validated (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputpong, 2007) on all sides helps to maximise the authenticity, relevance and rigour of the data collected and the process employed to collect them. When data collection with participants is approached in this manner, the participants immediately recognise the difference in relationship from one of researchers being the expert to one where there is a shared learning platform. Relatedly, data analysis based on the CHE principles is more

comprehensive and robust because it takes account of the widest possible range of viewpoints and representations of interpretations of the complex phenomena being investigated.

More broadly, adding the CHE principles to the armoury or toolkit of rural education researchers can contribute significantly to the processes and outcomes of that research. For instance, whether explicitly or implicitly these principles aligned closely with the data collection and analysis framing Sherman and Sage's (2011) study of rural residents' experiences and perceptions of threats to a community's survival in rural California following the collapse of the local timber industry. Similar alignment was evident in Hardré and Hennessey's (2010) account of the heterogeneity of rural high school students' motivations in Indiana and Colorado in the United States. Furthermore, conducting research and gathering rich data with participants in rural communities can assist in designing more effective intervention and support strategies (see for example Hamm, Farmer, Robertson, Dadisman, Murray, Meece, & Song, 2010).

Conclusion

This paper has explored the application of the CHE principles of connectivity, humanness and empathy (Reushle, 2005) to the authors' respective doctoral studies of selected elements of contemporary rural education (Brown, 2012; Danaher, 2001). Despite the differences between them, both projects were strengthened by the deployment of these principles, which nurtured the respective researcher-participant relationships and enhanced each investigation's relevance and rigour. The principles also helped the researchers to identify the participants' diverse aspirations and interests and assisted them in addressing those aspirations and interests as far as possible within the constraints of doctoral research.

More widely, the authors have sought to use the analysis presented here to argue for a different approach to and positioning of educational research within Australian and international rural communities. In particular, and in keeping with the CHE principles, ruralities research needs to be as respectful, responsible and reciprocal as possible. Only then will the potential contributions of such research in helping to strengthen and sustain those communities be realised.

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